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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, JANUARY 31 - FEBRUARY 13

11. The "Almaty Notes" series from U.S. Office Almaty focuses on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital."

OPPOSITION-ORIENTED ECONOMISTS CRITICIZE DEVALUATION

12. The devaluation of Kazakhstan's national currency, the tenge, dominated the news in Almaty. Two opposition-oriented economists reacted critically to the devaluation. Economist and Azat party deputy head Peter Svoik called it a "mixture of objective necessity and subjective stupidity". Economic analyst Oraz Zhandosov, who was previously co-chairman of Azat, called the decision "incompetent" and expressed doubts that the National Bank will be able to support the tenge within its new trading band of around 150 tenge to the dollar.

MAYOR STRATEGIZES ON KEEPING PRICES STABLE

13. Almaty Akim (Mayor) Akhmetzhan Yesimov held an extra-ordinary city administration meeting on February 5 to discuss measures to prevent prices from rising following the tenge's devaluation. Law enforcement bodies were ordered to shut down any exchange booths offering exchange rates better than the official National Bank rate. Large producers of food products and basic consumer necessities reported that they did not plan to raise their prices. The Akim's office set up a special commission -- which includes city officials, civil society activists, and representatives of the ruling Nur Otan party -- to travel around the city and monitor the prices of food, medicine, and consumer goods. Several Nur Otan representatives visited Almaty's central market on February 10 and reported that prices did go up, but not drastically.

OPPOSITON PARTIES DEMAND THE GOVERNMENT'S RESIGNATION

14. The opposition Azat party publicly demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Masimov and the dissolution of the parliament for mismanaging the economy. Azat head Bulat Abilov accused the

government of pursuing "inadequate and incomprehensible" economic policies. The opposition National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) backed Azat's demands. OSDP leader Zharmakhan Tuyakbay called for early elections this year, but added, somewhat incongruously, that OSDP would not participate because of its objections to the recently-adopted amendments to the election law.

OFFICERS FINALLY GET APARTMENTS

15. Members of the "BOMZh" movement of retired military officers, who have been battling with the Ministry of Defense for over two years, finally received free apartments owed to them. Most of the officers received apartments in Almaty. (NOTE: "BOMZh" is a Russian acronym meaning "without specific place of residence," which is used to refer to homeless persons. END NOTE.)

ACTIVISTS STOP HUNGER STRIKE

16. On February 2, activists from the "Leave the Houses to the People" movement decided to terminate their hunger strike to give the government a chance to respond to their demands. According to movement leader Aynur Kurmanov, the group is demanding that the government take steps to help those who can not make their mortgage payments, including lowering interest rates, granting temporary moratoriums on mortgage payments, and buying out bad mortgages. The activists will resume their hunger strike should the government not respond adequately to their demands by March 2.

HOAGLAND